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ABSTRACT

A considerable literature has developed on the tendency to ascribe the "blame" for unfortunate life events on the victims of the misfortune. Previous research has not explored fully the victim blame tendency in the case of child physical abuse. This study investigated the relationship between the experience of physically abusive parenting and the process of victim blame attitudes toward abused children. Subjects (N=897) were college undergraduates of whom 323 endorsed at least one of the severe violence items on the Conflict Tactics Scale. The mediating effects of these five variables in the relationship between abuse and victim blame were examined: self-derogation; personal similarity (identification with the abused child); empathic concern; belief in a just-world; and locus of control. A path analysis suggested that all five variables act as mediators. Individuals who endorsed having experienced physically abusive childhoods were more likely to agree with self-deprecative statements. Increased self-derogation predicted victim blame. It appears that repeatedly learning that one was a "bad" or "naughty" child may lead to a view of others as likewise. Adult survivors of abuse were more likely to identify with, or view themselves as similar to abused children. This study also demonstrated that individuals who had experienced abusive parenting scored lower on general empathic concern, which predicted higher levels of child victim blame. Results also suggested that lower levels of just-world beliefs, and greater external locus of control predict increases in child victim blame. (ABL)

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# The Victim Blame Process in Survivors of Physical Child Abuse

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Abstract

This study was an investigation of the relationship between the experience of physically abusive parenting and the process of victim blame attitudes toward abused children. The total sample consisted of 897 college undergraduates. Subjects were placed on an abuse continuum. We investigated the mediating effects of five variables in the relationship between abuse and victim blame. These were: (a) self-derogation; (b) personal similarity (identification with the abused child); (c) empathic concern; (d) belief in a just-world; and (e) locus of control. A path analysis of the data suggested that all five variables act as mediators. Overall, a positive relationship was revealed between abuse and attitudes of victim blame toward abused children.

A considerable literature has developed on the tendency to ascribe the "blame" for unfortunate life events on the victims of the misfortune. This phenomenon has been investigated mostly in the case of rape (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Krahe, 1988). Heretofore, research has not explored fully the victim blame tendency in the case of child physical abuse.

The current study is an investigation of the relationship between the experience of physical child abuse and the process of victim blame attitudes toward abused children. Prior research suggested five variables would mediate the effects of abuse on child victim blame. These were: (a) self-derogation; (b) personal similarity; (c) empathy; (d) just-world beliefs; and (e) locus of control.

Self Derogation. Several studies suggested that the abused child frequently has a low self-image (Hjorth & Ostrov, 1982), regards him/herself with self-deprecation (Green, 1982), and sees him/herself as "bad" rather than viewing the parent as inappropriate. We asserted that people who have undergone physical child abuse would be more likely to self-derogate, and hence more likely to blame abused children.

Personal Similarity. Investigating blame attributions for rape, Thornton (1984) demonstrated that the extent to which individuals see themselves as personally similar to a victim may influence the extent and style of their victim blame. It has been suggested (Libow & Doty, 1979) that blaming the self (and hence those we view as similar to ourselves) allows for a sense of control and a belief in the future avoidability of harmful outcome. We hypothesized that survivors of abuse would be more likely to view themselves as personally similar to victims of child physical abuse, and hence more likely

to direct victim blame toward them.

Empathy. Several studies (Main & George, 1985; Straker & Jacobson, 1981) found that abused children demonstrated lower levels of empathic concern for others than did controls. In addition, the rape literature (Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982) suggests that individuals lower on empathy toward rape victims are more likely to victim blame. We proposed that individuals who had experienced physical abuse would demonstrate lower levels of empathic concern and hence they would manifest higher levels of child victim blame attitudes.

Just-World Beliefs. In Lerner's (1980) view, it is difficult for individuals to accept the arbitrariness that characterizes the world. The existence of good people suffering threatens the conception that people get what they deserve. As such, victims are blamed for their misfortune (Kerr & Kurtz, 1977). We suggested that survivors of abuse would have had considerable prior exposure to the unfairness in the world. With such exposure, they should be aware that even the innocent suffer. Hence, they should be less likely to victim blame.

Locus of Control. It has been demonstrated (Barahal, Waterman, & Martin, 1981) that survivors of child abuse, in comparison with controls, are more likely to manifest external locus of control styles. In addition, Phares and Lamiell (1975) and Sosis (1974) found that external persons blame victims less than internals, perhaps because externals do not believe individuals can control outcome. We proposed that individuals who have experienced child physical abuse would demonstrate greater externality of control. Hence, they would be less likely to blame abused children.

It is instructive to note that the hypotheses above suggest antagonistic (opposing) effects. That is, the first three hypotheses assert a process by which experiencing physical abuse leads to increases in victim blame attitudes; the fourth and fifth hypotheses suggest a process by which abuse leads to decreases in victim blame. In order to test the possibility that antagonistic processes are taking place, the statistical technique of path analysis was employed.

## Method

### Subjects

Participants consisted of 897 college undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology at Michigan State University. Mean age for the sample was 19.3.

### Materials and Procedure

An adapted version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1989) was used in order to provide an indication of the respondents' childhood experience with physically abusive parenting. The self-report measure consists of 25 possible ways to deal with conflict ranging from discussing the issue calmly to using a knife or gun. For each parent separately, respondents indicated whether the parent had aggressed toward them at least once in the way described by each conflict tactic.

Participants were placed on a continuum from non-abused to extemely abused. Of the 897 participants, 323 individuals had endorsed at least one of the "severe violence" items on the CTS.

The Child Abuse Scenario Questionnaire (CASQ) is a measure of child victim blame developed for this study. The questionnaire consists of 8 scenarios of child

abusive situations. After each scenario, subjects respond on a Likert scale to 12 items indicating how much they view the child victim as responsible. For example: "This child was responsible for what happened to him/her because of what s/he did or said." Following each vignette, 4 items assessed the extent to which subjects viewed themselves as personally similar to the child. For example: "This child reminds me of myself."

The Self-Derogation Index (SDI) is an inventory developed for the current study. Three of the items measure the extent to which, during their childhoods, participants experienced self-derogation for parental punishment. For example: "When you were a child, to what extent did you see yourself as a bad child?" Three items assess the extent to which subjects experience current derogation of their childhood selves for former parental punishment. For example: "To what extent do you now see yourself as having been a bad child?"

Empathy was measured by way of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983). This 28-item self-report measure evaluates individual differences on empathy. Subjects respond to self-descriptive statements on an intensity scale.

The Just-World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1973) is a 16-item scale designed to measure the extent of an individual's belief that the world is fair. Respondents indicate their agreement with each attitudinal statement on a Likert scale.

The I, P, and C Scales (Levenson, 1981). This 24-item self-report locus of control questionnaire measures the extent to which an individual believes s/he has control over his/her own life.

The Duncan Socio-economic Index (Duncan SEI) (Hauser & Featherman, 1977). This self-report measure was used to obtain socio-economic status information on subject family of origin. Participants provided information on both parents' occupations.

All the above questionnaires were group administered. Subjects were informed of their right to decline participation.

## Results

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we examined the measurement model. Next, we tested the accuracy of our proposed path model via path analysis.

The Measurement Model. Several earlier researchers (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982) have suggested that in order to conclude that a scale is structurally unidimensional, the correlations among the items should be consistent with two product rules. These are internal consistency and external consistency (parallelism). If the correlations among the items within a cluster form a Spearman Rank 1 matrix, they are said to be internally consistent. Items are externally consistent if their correlations with all variables outside the cluster are directly proportional to one another (Hunter, Gerbing, & Boster, 1982). In order to analyze the measurement model of this study, the estimation procedure used was a multiple-groups centroid (confirmatory) factor analysis.

The cluster solution was sought by successively repartitioning the items until the criteria of unidimensionality was achieved for each cluster. On the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), the Self-Derogation Index (SDI), and the Just-World scale no items were rejected on the grounds of either internal or external consistency. On the Child Abuse Scenarios Questionnaire (CASQ), 1 item was rejected. On the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), 1

item was rejected. On the I, P, and C scales, 4 items were rejected. For all the scales in the study, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients ranged from .77 to .98 except for Just-World beliefs for which the reliability was .64.

The Path Analysis. In order to hold the (potentially confounding) effects of socio-economic status constant, the linear effects of this variable were partialled out. The correlations among the relevant factors were then used as input for the path analysis. The path coefficients were estimated using the procedure of ordinary least squares.

Insert Figure 1 about here

A path model was generated, which reflected the a priori hypotheses. Figure 1 illustrates the path model which most closely fit the data. Correlations between constructs can be found in square brackets (*ps* < .05, for all correlations), while path coefficients or beta weights can be found within the parentheses. The sampling error analysis indicated that the Chi-square test for goodness of fit was not significant ($\chi^2(14) = 19.13$, $p > .10$). That is, there was no significant difference between the model and the data. This indicated a model which provided good fit for the data.

It should be noted that the overall correlation between child physical abuse and current child victim blame was $r = .18$ ($p < .001$).

## Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with the first three hypotheses. Self-derogation, personal similarity, and empathy all appear to mediate the effect of physical child abuse on child victim blame in the manner proposed. Specifically, individuals who

endorsed having experienced physically abusive childhoods were more likely to agree with self-deprecative statements (consistent with Hjorth & Ostrov, 1982). Increased self-derogation predicted victim blame. It appears that repeatedly learning that one was a "bad" or "naughty" child may lead to a view of others as likewise.

Adult survivors of abuse were more likely to identify with, or view themselves as similar to abused children. This predicted increases in their child victim blame attitudes. It may be that as predicted, harm avoidance motives (Libow & Doty, 1979) are operating. Blaming oneself or those we see as similar to ourselves may provide an illusion of future avoidability of harmful outcome.

Consistent with Main and George (1985), the current study demonstrated that individuals having experienced abusive parenting scored lower on general empathic concern, which predicted higher levels of child victim blame.

Only partial support was found for the fourth and fifth hypotheses. We suggested that survivors of abuse would be less likely to endorse just-world beliefs, and that they would demonstrate a more external locus of control (cf. Barahal et al., 1981). Both of these assertions were corroborated. However, we also proposed that less belief in a just-world and external locus of control would each predict less victim blame. Instead, the data suggest that the lower levels of just-world beliefs, and the greater external locus of control predict <u>increases</u> in child victim blame. One explanation for these results may be that formerly abused persons, who believe they do not have much control over an unfair world become anxious over the potential harm that may befall them. In the interest of harm avoidance motives, they manifest victim blame attitudes toward abused children.

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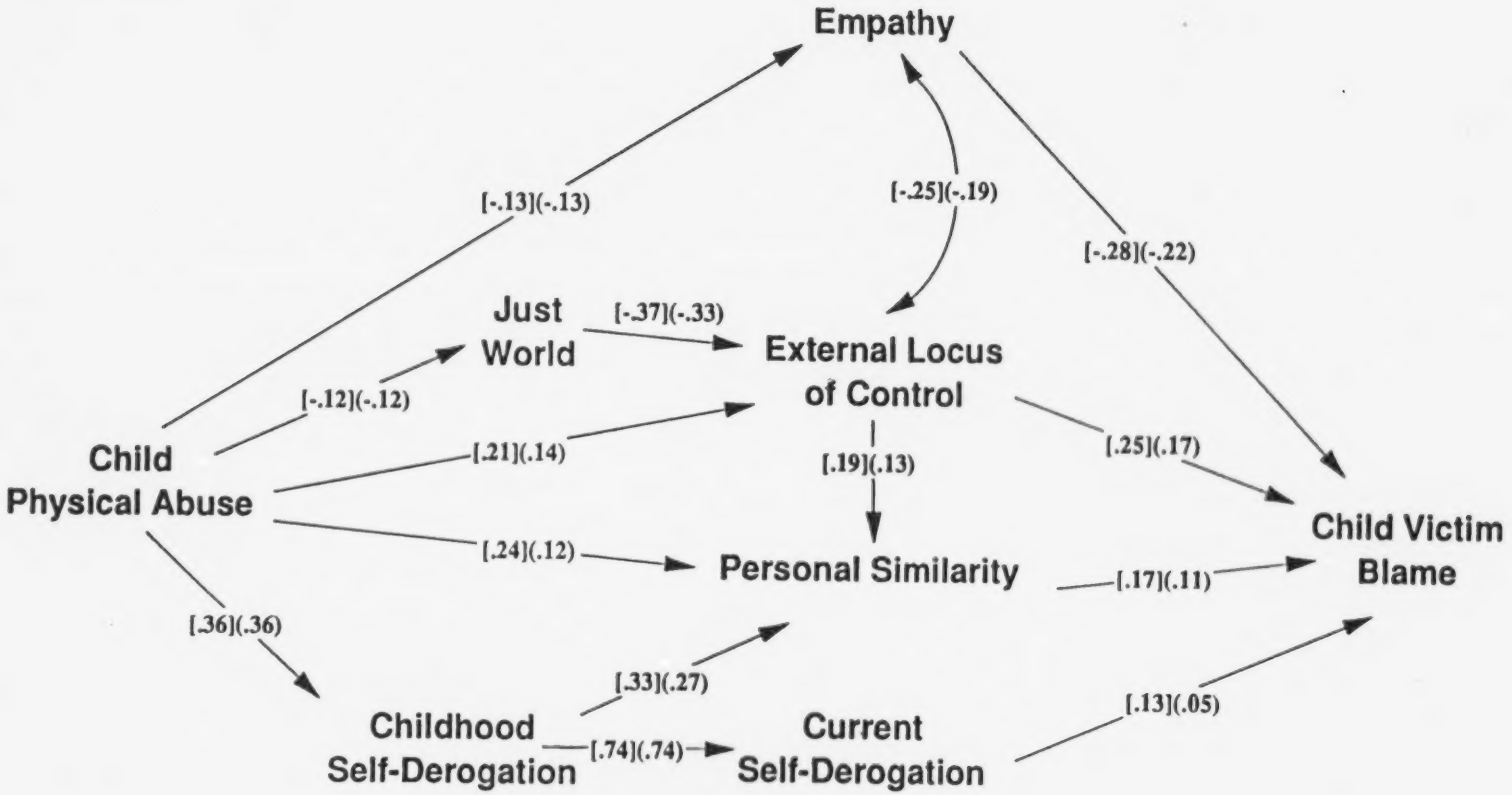


[ ] = Correlation
( ) = Path Coefficient